

AN EARLY FRENCH NATURALIST AT THE SWAN RIVER

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In October, 1800 the French expedition, consisting of the corvettes *Geographe* and *Naturaliste*, under the command of Nicholas Baudin, left France with the object of exploring the coast of New Holland. Baudin was captain of the *Geographe*, and the *Naturaliste* was commanded by Emmanuel Hamelin. The naturalists with the expedition included Francois Peron (1775-1810), zoologist; Stanislas Levillain (? -1801), zoologist; Leschenault de la Tour, botanist, and Charles Alexandre Lesueur, natural history painter. At Isle-de-France (Mauritius) on April 22, 1801, Levillain was transferred from the *Geographe* to the *Naturaliste*.

On the return of the expedition to France, Peron commenced the publication of the official account of the voyage, *Voyage de Decouverte aux Terres Australes*, but, dying in 1810, the work was completed by Louis de Freycinet, lieutenant on the *Naturaliste*.

The two vessels reached the south-west coast of New Holland in May, 1801, and Cape Naturaliste and Geographe Bay were named; a storm driving the vessels out of Geographe Bay, they became separated, the *Geographe* going on to Sharks Bay, and the *Naturaliste* to Rottnest Island. The *Naturaliste* anchored at Rottnest Island on June 14, 1801, and various parties were sent off to examine the other neighbouring islands and the Swan River. In the published account (vol. 1, p. 184), Freycinet mentions that Pierre Milius, lieutenant on the *Naturaliste*, and Stanislas Levillain went to visit the islands lying south-south-east of Rottnest Island. He states that the little sterile island was named Ile Berthollet [= Carnac Island], and the one south of it Ile Buache [= Garden Island]; this latter island he mentions was covered with a great number of seals, many of which were killed by the sailors. He quotes Levillain's account of the effects of eating the *Zamia* palm nuts.

Among the records in the French Ministry of Marine there is, however, Levillain's original report which he handed to his commanding officer, Hamelin, after his return to the *Naturaliste* from this visit to the islands lying south-south-east of Rottnest Island, and there is a manuscript copy in the National Library at Canberra. As any information, however limited in extent, on the early natural history of Western Australia is of importance, opportunity is taken to print a full translation of Levillain's report as it enlarges considerably on the brief references in the printed account of the voyage. The translation was made for me by Mr. N. Threlfall of Perth.

LEVILLAIN'S REPORT

On the twenty-eighth of Prairial, year 9 [June 17, 1801], when the weather was fairly fine, I set out with Citizen Milius,

Ship's Lieutenant, to visit the island S. $\frac{1}{2}$ S.E. of Rottneft (1). We reached it, but as we were about to anchor there we saw another island (2) a league further on, and made our way to it, threading our way between several rocks, which left us enough room to reach it. We had scarcely landed when we saw a large number of "sea-bears" or seals (3), of which we killed a great number.

We saw no other types of quadruped, but in the scrub we saw several birds of prey of the buzzard family and some very large crows. Along the shore there were several types of water birds, such as oyster catchers with black bills and red feet and eyes, and black-and-white grebes (4), which continually strutted around on the rocks. We found the broken pieces of some rather beautiful shells, such as trumpet shells, spiral shells, sea-ears, delicate sponges, etc.

Although the soil was sandy, nevertheless it produced a large number of trees and plants, some of which were like a large type of heather, and others smelled of myrtle, and many varieties of red and yellow flowers, which lent a somewhat gay appearance to these gloomy and solitary forests.

After travelling right around the island and exploring a little of the interior, we re-embarked in the ship's boat in order to depart. We left behind us a bottle containing a note which told of our visit to this place, and the hunting which we had done. In view of this same hunting, we named this island Bear Island (5). We took 5 of the largest of these big creatures on board, to supply the ship's crews with fresh meat, and at 5 p.m. we set sail, not by the same route by which we had come, since there were too many reefs to be avoided, and because night was approaching as well; for those reasons, we steered along the coast of the mainland.

Instead of having favourable weather, as we had when setting out from the ship, we had persistently contrary winds and snatches of rough weather. The sea kept rising and the water began to come into our boat in such quantities that it took two men all their time to bail it out. After tacking a little from side to side, we could no longer see the "Naturaliste's" signals, and we were already very tired and wet.

At midnight, as Citizen Milius saw that it would be impossible to rejoin the ship, he gave the order to drop anchor under the lee of a sand hill to the east of the ship. We spent a night full

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- (1) Carnae Island.
 - (2) Garden Island.
 - (3) The Hair Seal, *Neophoca cinerica*.
 - (4) "des Grebes noirs et blancs"—these were undoubtedly Pied Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax varius*)—still numerous there.
 - (5) "Ile aux Ours"—this naming is not referred to by Freycinet in Peron's book, where the island is named "Ile Buache."

of hardships and anxiety; the sea was extraordinarily rough, and from time to time we shipped big, high-erected waves, which caused us great trouble and weariness.

At dawn we set up our mast again and set sail into a contrary wind, with the weather still bad. As we were tacking along the shore, and were just putting about, our mast snapped and fell into the sea, taking the sail with it; we therefore anchored quickly. We mended the mast and tried to set off again, but the sailors were too slow in carrying out the orders given them, the sea was running high, and the currents and the billows drove us aground. Citizen Milius jumped into the sea and strove with all his strength to refloat the boat, but no one helped him, and he was thrice swept over by the waves. Finally, as we saw that he could do nothing on his own and as some of the sailors were shouting for help, panic stricken by the heavy seas dashing into the boat, in order to save ourselves we all jumped into the sea intending to swim ashore.

I cannot swim, but it was highly necessary for me to make up my mind to do so or to perish. Fortunately, we all escaped drowning. Someone had the presence of mind to take ashore a rope which was fastened to the boat. By this means we were able to haul it ashore and even to save a portion of the stores and belongings which had not been washed away by the high waves. I myself managed to get a great coat (worth 150 francs in French money). It was the first time I had used it!

This was not the last of our troubles. When we reached the shore, we had been wet for eighteen hours, but we were unable to make a fire, since our gun powder was all spoilt by the sea water, as well as our tinder.

Citizen Milius had all our things piled together, as well as the boat's equipment. With the sails and oars we made a tent, and firewood was got ready; but our position was a cruelly uncomfortable one, and for four long hours we tried, in vain, all possible ways of lighting a fire, for we needed one ever so badly. Fortunately, one of the boat's crew had saved a lens, or burning glass, from the boat; but there was no sun. As an unexpected blessing, it appeared for a moment; this sailor succeeded in lighting his pipe, and this fire gave us the greatest pleasure. We were lucky enough to light a candle by the same method, and in a few moments we had plenty of fire.

Those who were first dry went and set up on the highest points of land two masts with flags attached, so that they could be seen from the ship and the crew would know where we were. In another spot they prepared a wooden beacon by the water's edge, so that if the flags were not seen, at least the fire would be seen at night.

On the next day, in spite of the bad weather, a small dinghy reached us, and we informed the men in it of our unfortunate

position. We had only a very little biscuit, and even that was soaked with sea water; and as we had only a little fresh water, we had the greatest need of help, since we could find nothing useful in this place.

Some of the sailors reported to us that they had seen along the beach a big ship's sprit and a pair of trousers belonging to a member of the ship's crew. This news caused great anxiety among us for our comrades' safety, and Citizen Milius got me to go with him to look for the mouth of the Swan River, and in particular to see if we could see the ship.

We covered at least a good 4 or 5 leagues (6), often waist deep in water, and had as our only refreshment some brackish water flavoured with a little arrack. In the evening we came back to the encampment tired out and badly in need of rest; and learned from some of the sailors who had received news from the crew of the little boat which had been sent us, that Captain Hamelin and several other men aboard the ship were sure that they had seen a ship under sail, and everything justified the belief that it might be the "Geographe." (7) We were most delighted to hear this news.

On the next day, after we had had some rest, Citizen Milius and I, accompanied by several sailors, set off again, but this time in a different direction, to reach the Swan River. We passed through several patches of forest, encountering several kangaroos, which however were too far away for us to shoot them. We also saw a large number of red-bellied green parrots (8), and a large, black vulture-like bird of prey the size of a turkey (9), besides many other little wild birds.

Coming nearer the river we found an enormous bird's nest in a fig tree. This nest was made of roots and sticks and was some 6 to 7 feet from the ground. What bird's could it have been, I wonder? (10) As we went along the river we saw two native huts, but they were empty at the moment of human beings. There

(6) The party was working its way on the mainland between Rockingham and Fremantle.

(7) The *Geographe* had become separated from her consort in Geographe Bay by a storm and it was arranged by the Commander, Baudin, that they should rendezvous at Rottneest Island and then at Sharks Bay. However, the *Geographe* proceeded direct to the latter destination.

(8) Very probably these were Western King Parrots (*Purpureicephalus spurius*), though the Western Rosella (*Platycercus ieterotis*) has red under-parts.

(9) Probably the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*).

(10) Perhaps the White-breasted Sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*). It does not now breed in this district.

were two spears and some freshly burnt wood in them; we left two knives and two pieces of blue cloth there.

As we feared that the bad weather would prevent help from the ship reaching us, we searched all through this barren land for any edible fruits or plants growing in it. We found a sort of almond, which to us seemed excellent when baked in the coals. Indeed, it tasted like chestnut, but how we were punished for our curiosity! We became so sick that we thought we were dying, and when I had vomited the little of it that I had eaten I underwent a terrible attack of dry retching and vomited a good two glassfuls of blood; this has since made my lungs feel extremely weak. (11).

At last they sent us from the ship some provisions, some men, and planking and tools to mend the boat. And in five days, after great toils, difficulties and efforts, we re-launched our boat, and reached the ship after four hours' rowing. We were very weak, and tears stood in our eyes as we embraced our Captain and all our comrades.

What reflections I have to make after this unfortunate shipwreck, as I lost my father and a brother in this way! Now I am at last on the ship again, I hope to reach home again, in spite of my delicate constitution and our poor food. (12)

On the shore I found a great piece of amber (13); and if it is really amber, it will be worth 200 piastres to the government. It has already been placed in a section of the number 1 Museum Collection.

I also brought back with me some birds, such as parrots, wag-tails, etc., etc.

Aboard the Corvette "Naturaliste."

Stanislas Levillain

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- (11) This was the fruit of the *Zamia Palm* (*Macrozamia Reidlei*). It was named after Anselme Riedle who was chief gardener on the *Geographe*, by the botanist Gaudichaud. The name has priority over the better known *Macrozamia Fraseri*. The manner in which the aborigines treated the fruit to get rid of the poisonous properties is described by Sir George Grey in his "Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia," 1841, vol. 2 p. 296.
- (12) Unhappily poor Levillain died six months later as described on p. 213 of vol. 1 of Peron's book. He died on December 29, 1801. Peron remarks that a cruel dysentery had pursued him since the vessel left Timor complicated by a pernicious fever diaphoretique. He was buried at sea. His death affected the spirits of all on board both the vessels as his "extremely sweet and quiet" character had rendered him dear to all his companions. Peron mentioned that at Sharks Bay, Levillain had made a fair collection of the fossil shells which make up a large part of the shoreline at the southern end of Sharks Bay, one of the most remarkable features of that place.
- (13) "un enorme moreceau d'ambre." Possibly Levillain meant to write ambergris.